
TESTIMONY OF KATHERINE GONZALEZ

JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

MARCH 2, 2009

OPPOSED TO H.B. 6386 AN ACT DELAYING IMPLEMENTATION OF
LEGISLATION RAISING THE AGE OF JUVENILE JURISDICTION

Good afternoon. My name is Katherine Gonzalez, and my son, Carlos, is incarcerated at Manson. It is painful for me to tell Carlos's story. But I'm here to tell it because you need to hear it before you make any decisions about the implementation of Raise the Age.

Carlos has had treatment for ADHD and bipolar disorder for years. I know how important it is to keep a kid with Carlos's issues engaged in productive activities. So I do my best to get my kids into programs, especially during the summer. Last summer, however, funding for many activities was cut. That was especially difficult for my children, since I work a full-time job and am attending school to better my family's future. Carlos was 14 last summer.

When Carlos was unsupervised, he snuck out to go to a friend's house. Someone at the party had a BB gun, which Carlos played with. He accidentally shot a friend. She was not seriously injured. What Carlos did was wrong and he should be held accountable for it. He was irresponsible. But he is not a criminal. Nevertheless, he was arrested.

My lawyer told me that a trial would cost \$10,000 to \$15,000. I don't have that kind of money. I had only three days to decide whether or not to accept a plea bargain. I was told that a five-year adult sentence, suspended after two was the best my son could get. He began serving that sentence on February 13. I went to see him the next morning, the saddest Valentine's Day of my life.

He told me he was hungry, and I could see he was suffering from one of his migraines. He told me he was afraid to report his headache to the guards, who had greeted him with comments like: You're going to be here a long time, kid. He was wearing sneakers in such bad condition that he was having trouble walking. But they aren't bad enough to get him assigned a new pair.

I've tried to sign up to send my son money so that he can buy things inside – like new sneakers and like thermal shirts, because it is so cold in his cell. But the

~~staffer I talked with told me that Carlos is there to be punished and that I should~~
"make him suffer a little."

He's already suffering more than a little. This is 15-year-old boy with a history of serious depression locked up with men who are much bigger than him, taken away from his family and his school, and not even given basic necessities.

One of the hardest things for me to bear is that I know there are empty slots in juvenile programs. These are slots the state is already paying for. But we have this crazy idea that it's better to put kids in adult facilities because that's tough on crime. It's not. It's just tough on kids.

Actually, it's tough on kids like mine. What my son did was no different than an accident the vice president of the United States had the year before. No one arrested Dick Cheney. The rules are different for kids like Carlos. I have no doubt that if I'd had \$15,000 in the bank to pay for legal representation at trial my baby would be home with me now.

As I told you, I work hard to get my kids into positive activities. After Carlos went into Manson, I found out that he'd been accepted into a program that gives New Haven children laptops and computer training. What do you think would better help my son to grow into a responsible young man? Getting training that will help him get a job one day? Or being locked up with adult criminals?

You're considering delaying the implementation of Raise the Age to save money. 10,000 youth go through the adult system every year – a system that does them more harm than good. What I'm hearing is that the state is willing to throw away 20,000 kids to save some money. The more I learn about excess capacity in the juvenile system, I question whether you're even going to save a significant amount of money.

Respectfully, I have to say the idea of delaying Raise the Age offends me. We know that adult prisons are no place for kids. We have lost two boys in Manson in the past three years. Do you have any idea what it's like for me, a mother with a child locked up there, to think about that?

I would like to suggest that before you decide on this delay, you go to Manson and York. Talk to the kids there. Look into the eyes of a child living in an adult prison. That's the only way you can really get a sense of what you're voting on.